STATE OF COLORADO

MANAGER AWARENESS

Striking the Balance

Prepared by the Division of Human Resources in the Colorado Department of Personnel & Administration
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Not so very long ago, the expectation was that work was work and home was home, and never the twain shall meet. The values of that day are expressed in statements such as "It's a personal problem," "They chose to have kids," "Leave home at home," "In my day..."

However, times have changed, organizational climates are changing. The resulting conflict between the personal needs of the employee and the needs of the work place present a significant challenge to managers.

Why are organizational values changing?

The work place has changed significantly due to social, demographic, and economic factors. Diversity is not only inevitable -- it's here. The great majority (93%) of today's families no longer fit the traditional model of the 1950s and 60s.

- Dual career and single parent families are now approximately 68% of the workforce.

- Women work for economic reasons -- two thirds of working women are single, divorced, widowed or married to men who earn less than $15,000. By the year 2000, two thirds of all new entrants to the workforce will be women. Of these, 80% will be in their childbearing years and 90% of them will have children.

- For the first time, the workplace has a blending of generations with different sets of values.

- The elderly age group is growing faster than all other age groups. When people live longer, their ability for self-care diminishes. For employees, this results in the "sandwich" generation where elders and children are being cared for simultaneously. The average age of the elder caregiver is 37; state employees' average age is 44.

Business suffers the consequence of conflict between work and family, which affects the bottom line. Absenteeism alone costs American business $3 billion annually. Locally, one employer found its cost was

$1 million. The driving reason employers are sensitive to changing values is business needs. Sixty-seven percent of employees report that they are three times more likely to quit when there are work-life conflicts. Tardiness, absenteeism, distractions, low morale, turnover, and low productivity because of family concerns affect the organization's bottom line.

Employers no longer offer life-long job security or other guarantees of a different era. Employers want productivity, flexibility, adaptability, skills, and a compatible attitude from employees. Employees want flexibility and recognition that they have personal needs. Salary and benefits are not enough anymore. Surveys of employees and job seekers show that a supportive culture or supervisor is most important, followed by work-life programs. Tight labor markets are not going away but employers no longer look exclusively at raising base salaries for the answer. The vast majority of employers now offer some form of work-life program with the options continuing to grow. Work-life is essential if an employer is going to compete for a competent, quality workforce.

Employees are no longer viewed as just an expense, but as the employer's most valuable resource in accomplishing the work. They are a long-term investment where the return is productivity as a result of reduced recruitment costs and better retention. Managers must assume responsibility for dealing with the impact of personal concerns on individual productivity. Ultimately, the organization's successes may depend on how effectively managers deal with the challenge of balancing the needs of the work place and employees' families.

Managers cannot be expected to disregard their work objectives in order to accommodate personal needs, but they must accept that personal responsibilities are part of their employees' lives and do impact productivity and efficiency. Managers who do not try to adjust their management styles can expect to face turnover, recruitment difficulties, absenteeism, and morale and loyalty issues. We are in an era of reform where managers play a key role in shaping the new work place culture.

How do managers respond?

Managers need new tools and the skills to address the challenge. Some suggestions are provided below.

- Accept that employees' personal responsibilities and diverse values are valid. They are real and cannot be ignored or wished away.

- The key to successfully managing competing demands is to find mutually beneficial solutions. Efforts to accommodate personal demands are often rewarded with employees who also try harder. Be open to negotiation and keep communication flowing.

- Make employees part of the solution. They are creative adults who know the work processes well. Partner with them in problem resolution. The whole work unit can benefit.

- Plan ahead. Don't wait for a crisis to develop. Both managers and employees can use "what if" lists to help plan for life events. For example, what if the child is sick or school is out?

- Create an open atmosphere that is sensitive to the correlation between performance and personal obligations.

- Make expectations clearly understood. Employees must know the latitude available.

- Be aware of employees' individual work styles and behavioral problems that may arise. Keep an ear open for the causes. Informal records help track patterns before difficulties arise.

- Differentiate between occasional vs. chronic problems, and performance vs. Personal conflicts. Approach them differently because not all circumstances are the same and interventions will be different.

- Use the management tools offered by the state personnel system, including job sharing, flextime, flexplace, dependent care flexible spending accounts, employee assistance programs, family leave, family sick leave, leave sharing, and training opportunities.

- Be able to suggest small practical things to help control the situation in the office. Don't be afraid to take risks -- if at first you don't succeed, try again. For example, allow a daily two-minute call to a new child-care provider for a couple of weeks. Allow employees time to adjust to life events with options such as phased-in return to work, and keeping connected to the work place while on leave.

- Be aware of new programs or options that add innovative tools to a manager's repertoire and ability to deal with the challenge. Possible sources of information and ideas are agency human resources offices, the Employees Assistance Program, or the Work-Life Group.

In the long run, a manager's job is to get the work done. Be flexible and creative, but do not fail to take corrective measures when performance simply isn't up to standards and expectations. The challenge is to help without taking on the burden of the employee -- managers are not counselors.

The manager who gets the job done is one who deals with the problems of today's diverse workforce. Helping employees bridge the gap between work and family is one way.

For additional information, contact your agency human resources office. The Statewide Work-Life Coordinator can also provide information. Call (303) 866-2455 and ask for help with work-life programs.